

An Interpretation of the Opposition of Contraries as Generator of Harmony in Heraclitus

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ABSTRACT

We propose in this article some new elements for the interpretation of Heraclitus' doctrine, concerning in particular the role of the opposition of contraries as generator of harmony, that results from Fragments 8_{DK} and 51_{DK}. This interpretation is based on the conceptual tool of matrices of concepts. After having described the basic elements that govern the latter, we set out to define in this conceptual framework the notions of opposition and contrary, as well as of harmony. This allows us to give an interpretation and also a justification of Heraclitus' specific doctrine, according to which the opposition of opposites generates harmony.

Keywords

Heraclitus – dialectical monism – matrices of concepts – harmony – conflict – opposition – contrary

In this paper we shall propose some new elements for the interpretation of Heraclitus' doctrine, in particular concerning the role of the opposition of contraries as a generator of harmony. Such an interpretation is based on the conceptual tool of matrices of concepts.¹

In what follows, we will first describe Heraclitus' specific doctrine of the opposition of contraries as a generator of harmony, as it results from the quotations attributed to him and in particular from Fragments 8_{DK} and 51_{DK}. We will then describe the basic elements that govern the matrices of concepts. Finally, we will show how the very structure of these matrices allows us to interpret and justify Heraclitus' specific doctrine that the opposition of contraries can engender harmony.

I. The opposition of contraries as a generator of harmony in Heraclitus

The opposition of contraries as a generator of harmony constitutes a part of the doctrine that is associated with the form of dialectical monism inherent in Heraclitus' thought. From a reading of the Fragments, several elements indeed converge to constitute a doctrine that can be defined as a form of dialectical monism. Such a doctrine asserts the unity that results from the union of contraries² or opposing notions or objects. This form of dialectical monism emerges in particular through Fragment 88_{DK}:

¹ Franceschi 2002.

² Kahn 1979, 131.

And, (?) as (one and) the same thing, there is present (in us?) living and dead and the waking and the sleeping and young and old. For the latter, having changed around, are the former, and the former, having changed around, are (back) again (to being) the latter.³ (*Plutarch, Consolation to Apollonius*)

and in a similar way in Fragment 60_{DK}:

A road up (and) down (is) one and the same (road). (*Hippolytus, Refutation of all Heresies*)⁴

These two Fragments highlight the unity that results from the union of contrary, opposing notions or objects.

In what follows, we will focus on a specific part of Heraclitus' doctrine, which can be considered as a constitutive element of Heraclitean dialectical monism. In particular, it is the doctrine that harmony arises from the opposition of contraries, from conflict, from discord. Such a doctrine results from two quotations which are constituted by Fragments 8_{DK} and 51_{DK}. Fragment 8_{DK} is as follows:

[Heraclitus said that] what opposes unites, [and that the finest attunement stems from things bearing in opposite directions, and that all things come about by strife].⁵ (*Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics*)

This quotation highlights the fact that harmony results from the opposition of contrary notions or objects, from struggle, from conflict. And a similar idea results from Fragment 51_{DK}:

They do not understand how, while differing from (or: being at variance), (it) is in agreement with itself. (There is) a back-turning connection, like (that) of a bow or lyre.⁶ (*Hippolytus, Refutation of all Heresies*)

Thus harmony, according to Heraclitus, results from opposing tensions, from the opposition of contraries. In what follows, we will propose conceptual elements, compatible with Heraclitus' doctrine on this specific topic, which allow us to interpret, but also to explain and justify how the opposition of contrary elements can generate harmony.

II. The matrices of concepts

The interpretation that we will propose of Heraclitus' doctrine of the opposition of contraries as a generator of harmony is based on the matrices of concepts. It is a conceptual tool that allows, in particular, to construct and define precisely the relations of a given concept with a number of concepts that are associated with it.

We will therefore describe the basic elements governing the matrices of concepts. The latter are based on the notion of *dual poles (polar opposites)*. We will thus denote two dual poles A and \bar{A} . The latter are *neutral* concepts, which do not have any meliorative or pejorative nuance. They can thus be denoted by A^0 and \bar{A}^0 . We can thus represent them in the following way:

³ Robinson (1991, p. 53).

⁴ Robinson (1991, p. 41).

⁵ Robinson (1991, p. 15).

⁶ Robinson (1991, p. 37).

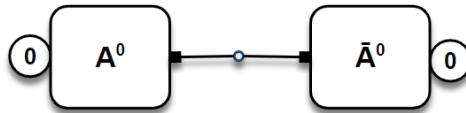


Figure 1. The neutral dual poles A^0 and \bar{A}^0

Examples of dual poles are the following pairs of concepts: *static/dynamic, internal/external, qualitative/quantitative, absolute/relative, abstract/concrete, diachronic/synchronic, unique/multiple, extension/restriction, individual/collective, analytic/synthetic, implicit/explicit*, etc.

From the notion of dual poles, we are in a position to construct the six concepts that make up a matrix of concepts. Each dual pole is associated with a positive and a negative concept. The positive and negative concepts associated with the neutral pole A^0 are thus denoted A^+ and A^- . And similarly, the positive and negative concepts associated with the neutral pole \bar{A}^0 are thus denoted \bar{A}^+ and \bar{A}^- .

At this stage, we are in a position to construct the matrix of concepts, which consists of the six concepts $A^+, A^0, A^-, \bar{A}^+, \bar{A}^0, \bar{A}^-$, which we term *canonical poles*. The structure of a matrix of concepts is thus as follows:

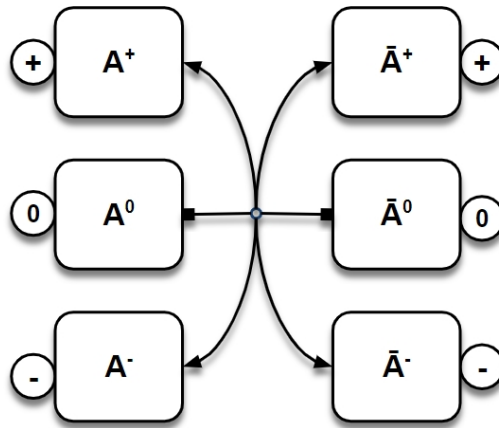


Figure 2. Structure of a matrix of concepts

It is also useful to mention, at this step, the main relationships that can be defined between the concepts of the same matrix, and in particular:

- (i) a *duality* relationship, which exists between the two neutral dual poles A^0 and \bar{A}^0 ;
- (ii) a relation of *bipolar opposition* (or *contrary*), which concerns two non-neutral (i.e. positive or negative) concepts of opposite polarity and belonging to two different poles: such a relation of contrary exists, on the one hand, between the concepts A^+ and \bar{A}^- and, on the other hand, between the concepts A^- and \bar{A}^+ ;
- (iii) a *complementarity* relationship, which concerns the two positive concepts A^+ and \bar{A}^+ ;
- (iv) a relation of *unipolar opposition*, , which concerns two non-neutral (i.e. positive or negative) concepts of opposite polarity and belonging to the same pole: such relationship exists, on the one hand, between the concepts A^+ and A^- and, on the other hand, between the concepts \bar{A}^- and \bar{A}^+ ;
- (v) a relation of *extreme opposition*, which refers to the two negative concepts A^- and \bar{A}^- .

Having provided the general definition of a concept matrix, it is useful at this stage to describe an instance of it. Thus, the following matrix constitutes an instance of a matrix of concepts:

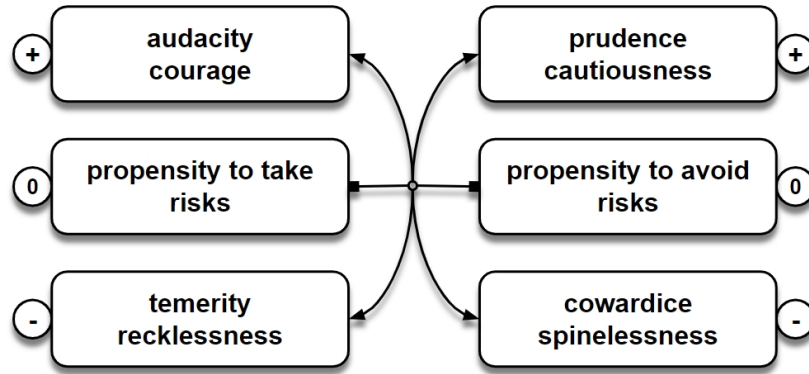


Figure 3. Instance of a matrix of concepts

The latter matrix mentions the positive concepts of courage and prudence, as well as the negative concepts of cowardice and recklessness, and the neutral concepts of propensity to take risks and propensity to avoid risks. Between the different concepts in this instance of the matrix of concepts, we have the following relationships:

- (i) a *duality* relationship between the two neutral concepts of propensity to take risks and propensity to avoid risks;
- (ii) a relation of *bipolar opposition* (or *contrary*) between the concepts of courage and cowardice on the one hand, and between the concepts of recklessness and prudence on the other hand;
- (iii) a *complementary* relationship between the concepts of courage and prudence ;
- (iv) a relation of *unipolar opposition* between the concepts of courage and temerity on the one hand, and between the concepts of cowardice and prudence on the other hand;
- (v) a relationship of *extreme opposition* between the negative concepts of recklessness and cowardice.

III. Interpretation of the opposition of contraries as generator of harmony

Heraclitus' thought is often considered difficult and unclear⁷, and thus earned him the nicknames 'riddler' by Timon of Phlius, as well as 'the obscure'⁸. It seems interesting, in this context, to try to clarify some elements of his doctrine. In what follows, we will propose an interpretation of Heraclitus' thought, which allows us to highlight and explain the elements of the latter that relate in particular to the opposition of contraries as a generator of harmony.

To begin with, we are in the position, in the present context, of defining accurately the notion of opposite. The conflict, the discord that arises from the opposition of contraries is likely to present itself, within the matrices of concepts, under three different forms:

- (i) the *bipolar opposition* (or *contrary*) relationship that arises on the one hand, between the concepts A^+ and \bar{A}^- and on the other hand, between the concepts A^- and \bar{A}^+ ;
- (ii) the *unipolar opposition* relationship that arises on the one hand, between the concepts A^+ and A^- and on the other hand, between the concepts \bar{A}^- and \bar{A}^+ ;
- (iii) the relation of *extreme opposition* which concerns the two negative concepts A^- and \bar{A}^- .

⁷ Williams 1985.

⁸ Kirk & Raven 1957, 184.

Such oppositional relationships concern in fact, in the present context, a significant number of concepts. We can mention in particular:

- (i) the relation of *bipolar opposition* (or *contrary*) between: firmness and laxity, inclemency and clemency; objectivity and subjectivity, impersonality and commitment; frankness and tendency to bias, bluntness and tact; mobility and sedentariness, instability and stability; self-respect and self-underestimation, immodesty and modesty; delicacy and insensitivity, oversensitivity and composure; capacity for abstraction and prosaicism, dogmatism and pragmatism; resolution and irresolution, stubbornness and flexibility of mind; courage and cowardice, temerity and prudence; optimism and pessimism, blissful optimism and awareness of problems; incredulity and credulity, hyper-distrust and justified confidence; generosity and avarice, prodigality and thrift, ...;
- (ii) the relation of *unipolar opposition* between: firmness and inclemency, laxity and clemency; objectivity and impersonality, subjectivity and commitment; frankness and bluntness, tendency to bias and tact; mobility and instability, sedentariness and stability; self-respect and immodesty, self-underestimation and modesty; delicacy and oversensitivity, insensitivity and composure; capacity for abstraction and dogmatism, prosaicism and pragmatism; resolution and stubbornness, irresolution and flexibility of mind; courage and temerity, cowardice and prudence; optimism and blissful optimism, pessimism and awareness of problems; incredulity and hyper-distrust, credulity and justified confidence; generosity and prodigality, avarice and thrift, ...;
- (iii) the relationship of *extreme opposition* between: laxity and inclemency; subjectivity and impersonality; tendency to bias and bluntness; sedentariness and instability; self-underestimation and immodesty; insensitivity and oversensitivity; prosaicism and dogmatism; irresolution and stubbornness; cowardice and temerity; pessimism and blissful optimism; credulity and hyper-distrust; avarice and prodigality,

Secondly, the notion of harmony within the matrices of concepts results from the relation of complementarity, which concerns the two positive concepts A^+ and \bar{A}^+ . Harmony, in this context, results from the union of the complementaries. The positive concepts of a same matrix maintain between them such a relation of complementarity. Thus, harmony is likely, just as before, to concern the following concepts : firmness and clemency; objectivity and commitment; frankness and tact; mobility and stability; self-respect and modesty; delicacy and composure; capacity for abstraction and pragmatism; resolution and flexibility of mind; courage and prudence; optimism and awareness of problems; incredulity and justified confidence; generosity and thrift; ...

Given these elements, we can now define accurately two heraclitean notions: opposition and harmony. We can thus identify opposition with the triplet of relationships: unipolar opposition, bipolar opposition and extreme opposition. And similarly, we can identify harmony with the union of the complementaries. This leads to the following interpretation of Fragment 8_{DK}:

what [is in opposition] unites, and the [complementarity] stems from things [being in opposition].

In the same way, the following interpretation of Fragment 51_{DK} ensues:

They do not understand how, while [being in opposition], (it) is [in a complementary relationship]. (There is) a back-turning connection, like (that) of a bow or lyre.

As we can see, Fragments 8_{DK} and 51_{DK}, interpreted in this way, lead to a convergent interpretation, according to which the concepts that are in a relation of opposition (under the three above-mentioned different modalities) finally generate the union of the complementaries that are

associated with them. Expressed in terms of matrices of concepts, Heraclitus' doctrine thus appears as follows: the opposition is eventually replaced by the union of complementaries. The opposition characterizes indeed a conflictual situation, underlain by tensions, discord and disharmony. Conversely, the situation characterized by the union of the complementaries turns out to be a situation in which conflicts, oppositions and tensions have disappeared, giving way to a situation that is marked by the harmony and concord that results from the union of the two positive concepts, of a complementary nature. Opposition thus gives way to complementarity. And it is understandable that the conflictual situation is not stable and must give rise, over time, to a more stable state of affairs, a situation where harmony and concord reign, where tensions, conflicts and oppositions have disappeared.

To the analysis proposed above, we can also associate an interpretation of the images of the bow and the lyre. This latter interpretation essentially corresponds to the one mentioned by Kirk (1954).⁹ The opposition is likely to manifest itself in two different ways. Firstly, such an opposition can be manifested in the location of the strings, which are situated on two opposite sides, both in the strings of the lyre and the bow.¹⁰ Secondly, another type of opposition is likely to occur, in the bow and the lyre. This opposition relates to the movement of the string, which oscillates, as far as the lyre is concerned, in one direction and then in the opposite direction. And similarly, in the case of the bow, the string is stretched in one direction, then released in the opposite direction. But these oppositions ultimately work together, in complementarity, in the case of the bow as in the case of the lyre.¹¹

Fragment 51_{DK} is considered by some analysts¹² to be one of the most controversial and enigmatic fragments of Heraclitus. The interpretation of this fragment is often associated with the meaning of the words that make up the fragment and in particular with that of ἀρμονίη¹³ as well as the adjective that applies to the latter: παλίντροπος (back-turning) ou bien παλίντονος (back-stretched).¹⁴ In the foregoing, we have endeavoured to propose an interpretation that accurately describes the general meaning of the doctrine expressed in Fragments 8_{DK} and 51_{DK} and which is also consistent with the form of dialectical monism expressed in other heraclitean fragments.

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⁹ Kirk (1954, pp. 214-217).

¹⁰ 'Admittedly the bow has a single string, the lyre has several strings, but the general structure of the two instruments is the same: a curved frame has its extremities joined by one or more strings, which hold it under tension.' (Kirk 1954, p. 214)

¹¹ Kirk also links his interpretation of the image of the lyre and the bow to the form of dialectical monism developed by Heraclitus: 'The two-way tension that exists between the frame and the string in bow and lyre is said to resemble the way in which something which is at variance (with itself) agrees with itself; or taken more concretely, the way in which something which is being carried apart is simultaneously drawn together. In view of Heraclitus' obsession with the opposites it does not seem too bold to guess that this something is the opposites in general, or each pair of opposites singly.' (1954, p. 216)

¹² Snyder 1984, 94.

¹³ Kahn 1979, 196-200 ; Kirk 1954, p. 207-208.

¹⁴ Snyder 1984, 91.

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